



SeafoodTrade Strategy - NOAA Service Account <seafoodtrade.strategy@noaa.gov>

RFI Response: Interagency Seafood Trade Task Force1 message

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Mon, Jul 27, 2020 at 9:43 AM

To: SeafoodTrade.Strategy@noaa.gov

Hello,

Our comments pertain to the USDA supervision of siluriformes (catfish). Although the transfer of inspection from the FDA to the USDA of catfish was ultimately designed to slow imports of basa/swai from places like Vietnam and protect American catfish farmers, the regulatory change has done little to prevent a further slide in market share for domestic farmers.

In fact, the catfish provision has actually [harmed small-scale farmers and fishermen](#) like us by increasing operational costs and erecting regulatory barriers that impede market access. Additionally, the USDA inspection program costs US taxpayers around \$10 million per year to perform a task already assigned to the FDA for all other seafood items. As a result of these barriers, the US also faces retaliation from countries like Vietnam and China that opened a WTO trade dispute in 2018.

Although the transfer of responsibility for catfish was advocated for under the guise of improving food safety and inspecting fish for pesticides and antibiotics used in fish farming, the provision unnecessarily applies to wild-caught fish as well. Wild-caught fish should be categorized entirely differently than farmed fish since they are not treated with chemicals nor fed antibiotics in the wild. Furthermore, the provision applies to the over 3,000 species in the siluriformes order although only the american catfish (*ictalurus*) and basa (*pangasius*) are farmed extensively.

For companies like ours processing the invasive armored catfish (*hypostomus plecostomus*), we're impeded from scaling our production and impact because of the USDA burdens. We make a jerky product from armored catfish fillet. We cannot currently import our fish from Mexico for processing. Although we have potential clients across the US and abroad, we're hindered from importing a product that we've lab tested numerous times simply because Mexico is not yet considered an equivalent country.

Additionally, we've tried to work with fishermen in Florida and Texas that are dealing with a similar invasion of armored catfish but since so many small plants have stopped processing catfish after the regulatory change, we've been unable to process large volumes of the fish in the US. We have created a domestic market for this "pest" causing a wide range of environmental and economic issues in regions of the US yet are unable to capitalize on this because of the onerous USDA catfish provision. If we could process this fish in FDA-inspected facilities, we would be able to create additional income for fishermen and their communities affected by the invasive armored catfish. Efforts to process the invasive blue catfish in the Chesapeake Bay have also been hampered because of USDA supervision that is designed for farm operations but are costly and inefficient for wild-caught operations.

As a result of these hurdles, we've moved our business operations from the US to Canada. We currently export fish from Mexico to Canada for processing into jerky. We sell our jerky in Canada and export as well. Even though there is no science-based food safety risk from our fish and especially as a cooked, shelf-stable product, we are still unable to sell our product in the US due to the USDA catfish provision.

Please consider returning catfish to the FDA or at least including an exemption for wild-caught fish. Wild-caught fish pose even less of a risk and are vital to sustaining thousands of small-scale fishermen and processors around the country. Wild-caught catfish is an important industry that does not represent the same threat as imported basa/swai since this fish is only farmed. Furthermore, there are important efforts to harvest and process invasive catfish, in turn helping restore the natural ecosystem and boost local incomes that have been unnecessarily impeded by this provision.

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information and I thank you for your time.

Thanks,

Mike

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